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Fire union is using streetcar as straw man

By Brian Chasnoff

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What's another couple hundred million dollars here or there?

When it comes to public perception of downtown streetcar, that's the source of a fight between VIA Metropolitan Transit and the San Antonio Professional Firefighters Association.

The union opposes streetcar, a political football this season tossed around by everyone from the Republican nominee for Bexar County judge to the firefighters, who are soon to collide with the city in contract negotiations.

In anticipation, the union is circulating a flier that suggests the city is ignoring "basic services like Public Safety" to pay for streetcar:

"Firefighters believe Basic City Services should be a top Priority ... Why does City Council want taxpayers to spend \$400+ million dollars to build and maintain just 5.9 miles of track? ... THE CITY IS NOT LISTENING!"

To which VIA has responded: The union is the one that's not listening.

On Wednesday, Charlie Gonzalez, senior vice president of public engagement at VIA, sent a letter to Chris Steele, the union's president. He opens with a reminder that on May 6, VIA officials met with Steele, who promised to "remain open to receiving information from VIA should VIA believe that the (union) was disseminating inaccurate information."

Gonzalez continued, "I emphasize what VIA continues to point out: The VIA Board of Trustees adopted a streetcar system with a cost of \$280 million, while urging staff to leverage our non-federal funds to the maximum level to permit extension of the system."

That "maximum level" could exceed \$400 million using "matching funds," Gonzalez said, from the federal government.

Steele didn't return a call.

Ironically, Greg Brockhouse, spokesman for the union, acknowledged some of the same facts that VIA and city officials are turning blue in the face repeating. Among them: The city has committed only \$32 million to streetcar.

The remainder would flow from a variety of sources: \$92 million from the Texas Department of Transportation, \$78 million from VIA, \$8 million from the federal government. The first phase of the streetcar route is budgeted at \$186 million.

"VIA has no money after this initial \$210 to \$280 million," Brockhouse said.

Is it not misleading, then, to tell voters that "City Council wants taxpayers to spend \$400+ million" on streetcar?

"I don't see that, no, not at all," Brockhouse said. "When I see it, and when we sat down and developed it, we said this is an all-in number from the taxpayer ... It's all coming from the taxpayer, whether it's federal funds or not."

(In a letter responding to Gonzalez on Friday, Brockhouse wrote, "To Wall Street in your bond filing last fall, you listed the Streetcar costs at \$419.5 million ... It is our opinion that \$280 million is only the cost to construct the line and VIA does not list ALL costs associated with constructing AND operating the streetcar line.")

Bold, capital letters aside, let's try to focus, for a moment, solely on the city's commitment.

San Antonio already devotes more than two-thirds of its general fund budget to public safety.

The financial impact of its \$32 million investment in streetcar would be spread over a 20-year period, starting in 2016 at less than \$400,000. For context, the city's general fund budget this year is \$988 million.

For the union, though, this debate isn't really about the numbers. It's about using streetcar as a straw man in negotiating its contract with the city.

If firefighters can turn voters against streetcar, and if they can convince those voters that council members are hurting firefighters to fund streetcar, perhaps those council members could be persuaded not to approve any cuts to firefighters' health care benefits, lest they risk the wrath of voters.

That's the political calculus, anyway, behind the numbers. In that sort of game, does \$280 million differ appreciably from \$400 million?

Does it even matter anymore?

"Can you at least be factual?" Gonzalez said. "We just wanted them to get the numbers straight, and they graciously said, 'Yes.' I guess I am somewhat surprised that they are sticking to the \$400 million."